DON'T GET DOWN IN THE MOUTH
Jonah, Chapter 1
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Do you ever wonder where preachers get their ideas for sermon titles? I could tell you about today's title: it was originally an employee's safety sign on the wall of a pillow factory. No, it wasn't. I just made that up. It really is intended as a reminder of the punchline about Jonah: "When you're down in the mouth, remember Jonah. He came out all right."

I choose deliberately to begin in this vein because that is the way the story of Jonah begins. It is full of humor and exaggeration and irony, some of which I hope will become clear as we talk about it.

Most people would quickly say, sure, they know the story of Jonah. It's all about that man long ago who was swallowed by a whale and lived inside him for three days before escaping. Some people would laugh off the story as being ridiculous: "I tell you, that's a whale of a story!" Others would defend the whale to the end as some sort of proof of their orthodox belief: "I would believe Jonah swallowed the whale, if the Bible said so!" In fact, though, the whale is only a minor character.

Today's scripture lesson was just the beginning of the story. To see what was going on, it is helpful to know that the name "Nineveh" was like saying Hitler and Nazi. To the Old Testament people that city was the embodiment of corruption and evil. Jonah refused to go there and instead turned tail and tried to run away from God. That is not the way we expect a prophet to act. When the raging storm threatens to sink the boat, Jonah is found sound asleep below deck. The pagan sailors turn out to have more faith in God's power than Jonah has shown. Finally they do what has to be done: Jonah goes overboard. Immediately the sea calms and the pagan sailors offer their spontaneous worship to the true God.

But Jonah is not to be allowed to escape his mission, not by running away, not by sleeping through the storm, not even by drowning. The fish swallows him and, after three days, deposits him on dry land. The story continues as God again commands Jonah to go to Nineveh, to denounce the Ninevites for their sinful ways. This time Jonah obeys. He enters the huge city and publicly pronounces Nineveh's doom. The effect is instantaneous! The whole pagan city turns to God immediately. Even the king of Nineveh joins in the act of penitence. Everything imaginable is done in the hope that the Lord's wrath may yet be turned away. One touch that I like especially is that the king makes a great proclamation that everyone must put on sackcloth as a symbol of their sorrow and repentance. And not only people, but also the animals--all the animals--must also be dressed in sackcloth, according to the king. Now, I can imagine a horse in sackcloth or even a dog. I've heard of dogs in mink jackets, so sackcloth seems fairly reasonable. But can you imagine chasing down all the mice and rabbits and forcing them into sackcloth garments so repentance would be one hundred and ten percent complete? That picture tickles my funny bone.

At any rate, the story continues: God is moved by this mass conversion. He holds back on the doom and punishment and instead He forgives the people of Nineveh. And that makes Jonah mad. He now comes clean on the reason he refused to go to Nineveh. It was because he knew that God is a compassionate God and all along Jonah was afraid it might turn out this way, with the evil Ninevites winding up all forgiven. Now those hated enemies of Israel are not going to be destroyed after all.

So Jonah goes into a long-distance pout. He prays to die rather than see Nineveh saved, but God pooh-poohs the idea. So Jonah angrily stalks out of the city and takes

up a position where he can watch, just sitting out there in the hot sun, hoping against hope that God will destroy the city anyway.

In the last act, God causes a large plant to grow up overnight and it shades Jonah from the burning sun. But the next day God has a worm eat the plant and it withers and dies. Exposed to the heat and sun again, Jonah gets even madder and rails against God for senselessly destroying the plant, an innocent plant. Then God asks the last question: "If you can feel pity for this helpless plant, should I not take pity on this great city with its multitudes of innocent children?"

The story ends with that question. Certainly it is much more than the common legends about big fish or sea monsters. This is a story which, in spite of its humor, has a very important meaning.

There have been some attempts to prove that the Book of Jonah is historically factual. But to me, all the evidence is on the other side. The story is a parable, much like the parables of Jesus. It was written to teach a specific lesson. And, like the parables of Jesus, this one also traps the listener, for it turns out really to be about us.

The book was written in the fourth century before Christ. At that time the Israelites had returned from exile. They had worked hard to rebuild their nation--restoring the wall around Jerusalem, rebuilding the Temple, constructing homes. With all that done, now they were concerned to protect and preserve. All their energies and thoughts were focussed on themselves. They were totally concerned with domestic affairs, business, economics, the housing market. The official position was isolationism--to shut themselves away from any outside force in order to protect and preserve themselves and all they had.

But they were, after all, the Chosen People, God's people, chosen for a purpose. And that is the reason the Book of Jonah was written. It was a strong blast against Israel's concern only for itself. Instead, the story of Jonah reminded the Jews that Israel was to be the "light to the nations". To be the Chosen People meant to be chosen to advance God's love in all the world.

But Israel was refusing to take that role, just as Jonah refused to go where God wanted him. To be a light to the nations does not mean isolationism, quite the reverse. It means to take the risk of contact. It means standing for God's love in international affairs, even with enemy nations. Jonah wouldn't face up to that; he rebelled against God's command. And when the Israelites in the fourth century originally heard the story of Jonah, they first laughed at this so-called prophet, this ridiculous figure who did everything he could to avoid God's call; they laughed at the whopper of a fish story; they laughed when the prophet pouted because he got more success than he wanted--they laughed until they realized they were laughing at themselves. Jonah was Israel. The parable had trapped them with its truth.

Does the parable of Jonah still work nearly twenty-three hundred years later? How about us who read it now? Are we somehow like Jonah? Do we know some command of God but don't fulfill it because something inside us rebels?

I think life is full of just such instances, at least it is for me personally. Plainly there are times in our relationships with children or spouse or close friends, times when what we clearly know to be best and right and true goes against the grain. Maybe the day has been long and the job has been rough and home becomes a place to escape, including to escape from the family. It's much easier just to sit in front of

the tube or behind the newspaper instead of communicating, sharing the day's happenings with wife or husband. On another track, what if I did injure someone's feelings a little bit yesterday? It's too humiliating to apologize now. It was unintentional and anyway, he's a big boy; he can stand life's little lumps. He probably had it coming. I find there are many occasions when my best self would lead me in one direction, but I stubbornly go the opposite way, like Jonah.

Then when Jonah sets out to escape from God, a strange situation comes about. He boards the ship and goes below deck and falls fast asleep. There were mighty forces stirring around him. A storm was sweeping across the sea which threatened the ship and all aboard. But Jonah was fast asleep.

Have we also been asleep? Our children are growing so fast, but are we awake to them as persons? Or are we so concerned with giving them the things we want them to have that we too easily excuse our failure to give them ourselves? A marriage goes on day after day, but are we awake to the depth of sharing it should have? When a ship like Jonah's breaks up in the storm, you can hear the loud creaks and groans and it is hard to sleep through it. But when a marriage is breaking up, the main sign may be the silence, the lack of communication between husband and wife. It is easy to sleep through that silence until marriage is wrecked. Or we may simply sleep away a lifetime, never coming wide-awake to the truth that each day is made to be lived fully.

Besides such personal, individual issues, there are other matters we are called to face <u>together</u>. One was brought home to me more forcefully than ever about ten days ago.

Together with twenty-three other Presbyterian ministers between the ages of forty and fifty-five, I spent a week in Ypsalanti, Michigan, a town which this year did not receive a single nomination in the category of "cultural center of the western world". We were there for our Mid-Career Seminar and we wondered if that meant "over the hill". We were extremely fortunate to have for leadership one of those rare, far-ranging minds which can sort through all the bits and pieces we read and hear about the future and present a coherent, understandable picture, and do it all with a historical perspective.

It was not a comfortable picture, by any means. Never far in the background of our discussions was the factor which is brand new with our generation: that mankind now has the easy capability of destroying itself. We looked at the whole concept of work and realized how much we rely on the work we do--all of us--to determine our sense of value as a person. What will that do to our world when we reach fifty percent unemployment because machines can do the work faster and cheaper? In fact, machines now can direct other machines to make the machines which produce and manufacture--no human beings needed except to get it started and for maintenance to serve the machines.

And what happens as we become more and more isolated from each other, as electronics makes it possible for us to carry out life functions from the isolation of our homes? The movie "Being There" is a most graphic illustration of how television already conditions every aspect of our life. You don't even have to worship with other people, for there is the Electronic Church in your own private home at the twist of a dial. With computers involved increasingly in production, many will find no need to go to work and mingle with other people; they can stay home and push buttons on their own private terminal. Already, much of banking can be done from your home phone--no need to stand in line or talk with a teller.

This picture of isolated, faceless individuality at first depressed us at Ypsalanti. We wondered if maybe we mid-career ministers could squeeze through to retirement before it really hit. Sort of like Jonah not wanting to go into threatening territory. Then we realized the church is called to minister to whatever world it confronts, that God is working to bring about His Kingdom in all that happens, no matter how threatening that may seem to us. We reviewed history and saw how that has happened over and over again as new orders, new civilizations, new understandings were brought into being.

Now, the church can try to run away from it all, Jonah-like. Or we can accept God's command to venture bravely into the alien territory of the Brave New World, whatever that is to be. It may be that the church family will become the major point of contact among people; congregations may become the real community and family grouping to heal increasing isolationism, increasing separateness. What a challenge and opportunity that will be! I got to thinking about just how well equipped Broad Street Presbyterian Church will be to accept that challenge. There is already a strong sense of family here, a strong foundation to build on. Then I began to feel very positive about the future and the possibilities we share. The challenge is exciting that God will work through our efforts as He worked so magnificently through Jonah's efforts in Nineveh.

No question about the storms around us. No question but that the ships we ride are being tossed about and threatened--marriage, family, work, community, church. Hurricanes of revolution and threats of war shake our world. But God has worked through storms before, repeatedly. That is what the parable of Jonah is all about. We must not run away from God's commands. We must not try to sleep through the storm. Remember, He is the strong God who could use even the weakness of a reluctant Jonah to change the world. Now He proposes to use us to make a difference in our world. Don't get down in the mouth.

Give us vision, O Lord, to see that You are the all-powerful God, the Lord even of today's world, no matter how threatening and difficult it seems to us. And then give us courage, not to run away or hide from the changes, the storms, but courage to be and to do what You command us, courage to work for You to infect our world with the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Amen.